

White Dove School of Conduct

White Dove School of Conduct

Content copyright © Stephen Che Chillun 2015.
Book cover and illustrations copyright © Stephen Che Chillun 2015.

All rights reserved. No portion of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted at any time or by any means mechanical, electronic, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior written permission of the publisher.

The right of Stephen Che Chillun to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Design and Patents act 1988.

A CIP record of this book is available from the British Library.

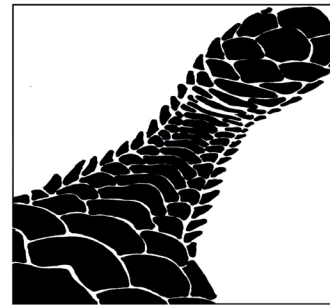
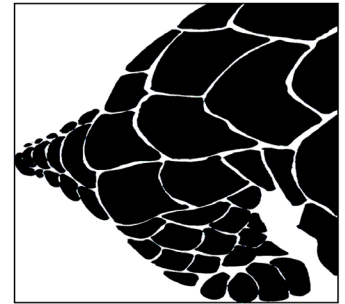
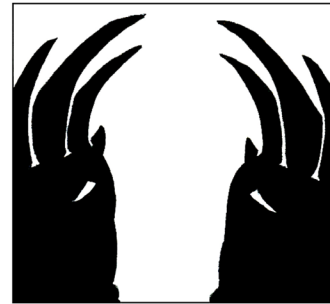
First printed 2015.

White Dove School of Conduct is the first book in a series of four.

ISBN 978-0-9931846-0-4



sunsetpenguins.uk



Stephen Che Chillun

To dancing with penguins as the sun sets.

To individually thank everyone who has helped would take several pages and this book is already long enough. Needless to say, all those concerned have my thanks in abundance and when I next see them can expect a big hug, which will be appealing to some, less so to others.

Students of Form Neptune

Charlie Dee (pangolin) - Smart but rebellious, he must decide how to cope with some major changes in his life.

Fillmore Lange (termite) - Walking, talking headache who's been at the school longer than any other student.

Ramsey Pitt (Emperor penguin) - Aloof, moody and often struggles with the heat, but very loyal to his friends and brother.

Stanley Pitt (three-toed sloth) - Most of his time is spent either sleeping or hugging.

Maggie Noman (Canada goose) - Smart, feisty and the school's Miss Popular.

Mary Sarney (Praying Mantis) - Kind-hearted and seems to have a different crush each week.

Ewart Lubbers (duck-billed platypus) - Painfully shy and still waiting for Mary to have a crush on him.

Harold Wolf (Dall sheep) - School suck-up merchant.

Mackenzie King (beaver) - Renowned for his building skills and bad language.

Neville Bird (booby) - So forgetful he has notes dotted on his person to tell him what to do.

Alfred Scullin (tapir) - One of the largest and strongest boys in the school.

Walter Savage (mandrill) - Leader of the school's notorious gang, the Meat Eaters.

Sidney Haughey (banded mongoose) - Vindictive and somewhat cowardly member of the Meat Eaters.

Harlem Honecker (dwarf sand snake) - Thoughtful if also thoughtless member of the Meat Eaters.

Harry Hoover (Madagascan fossa) - Crazy-eyed and slightly unhinged member of the Meat Eaters who believes his tail is evil.

Gerald Hoss (Tokay gecko) - Meat Eater wannabe.

Other Students:

Craig 'Guffer' Henbane (Komodo dragon) - Happily flatulent boy with halitosis.

Wilson Love (golden mole) - Geordie who is a wannabe Californian surfer dude.

Teachers

Headmaster Wickedom - With only his burning red eyes visible, the fearsome headmaster moves within shadows.

ART:

Mr (Vincent) van Gogh - Dutch post-impressionist painter (1853-1890).

CRAFT, DESIGN & INFORMATION (C.D.I.):

Mr Daedalus - Architect, inventor and craftsman from Greek mythology.

ENGLISH:

Mr (William) Shakespeare - English poet and playwright (1564-1616).

GEOGRAPHY:

Mr (Sir Walter) Raleigh - English aristocrat, writer, poet, soldier, spy, and explorer (1552-1618).

HISTORY:

Mr (Julius) Caesar - Roman general, statesman, Consul and notable author of Latin prose.

Miss (Elizabeth) I - Tudor Queen regnant of England and Ireland from 1558-1603 (1533-1603).

Mr (Henry) VIII - Tudor king of England from 1509-1547 (1491-1547).

LANGUAGES:

Mother Tongue - Knows every language that has been and is presently spoken.

MATHS:

Mr Pythagoras - Greek philosopher, mathematician (570 BC-495 BC).

Mr Archimedes (Deputy Head) - Greek mathematician, physicist, engineer, inventor, and astronomer (287 BC-212 BC).

MUSIC:

Mr (Ludwig van) Beethoven - German composer and pianist (1770-1827).

PHYSICAL EDUCATION:

Mr Hercules - Hero in Greek mythology, the son of Zeus and famed for his 12 labours.

SCIENCE:

Mr (Sir Isaac) Newton - English physicist and mathematician (1642-1727).

Mr Galileo - Italian physicist, mathematician, astronomer, and philosopher (1564-1642).

Mr (Alfred) Nobel - Swedish chemist, engineer, innovator, and armaments manufacturer (1833-1896).

SWIMMING:

Mr Poseidon - One of the twelve Olympian deities of the pantheon in Greek mythology.

SCHOOL NURSE:

Nurse (Florence) Nightingale - British social reformer and the founder of modern nursing (1820-1910).

Form Tutors:

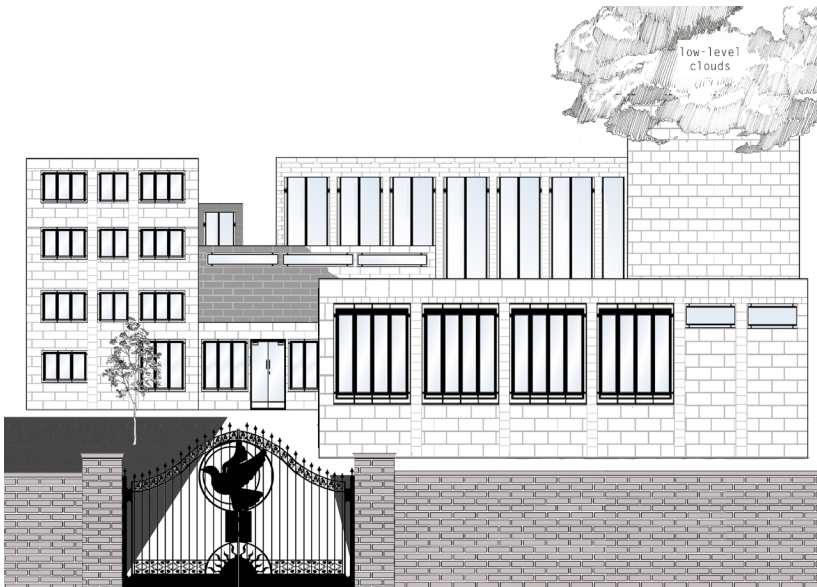
Form Sun - Mr Archimedes, Form Mercury - Mr Daedalus, Form Venus - Miss Fairweather, Form, Earth - Mr Newton, Form Mars - Mr Caesar, Form Jupiter - Miss I, Form Saturn - Mr Tesla, Form Uranus – Mr Poseidon, Form Neptune - Mr Pendleton.

Others:

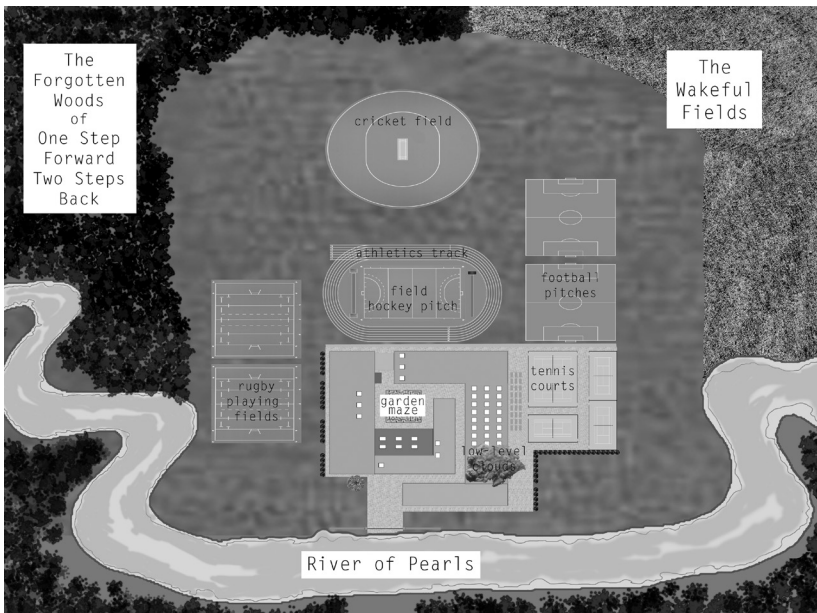
Mrs Muggins - Large canteen lady with an uncanny knowledge of what others want to eat.

The Courier - Tall, cloaked figure who communicates through the jingling of a small silver bell.

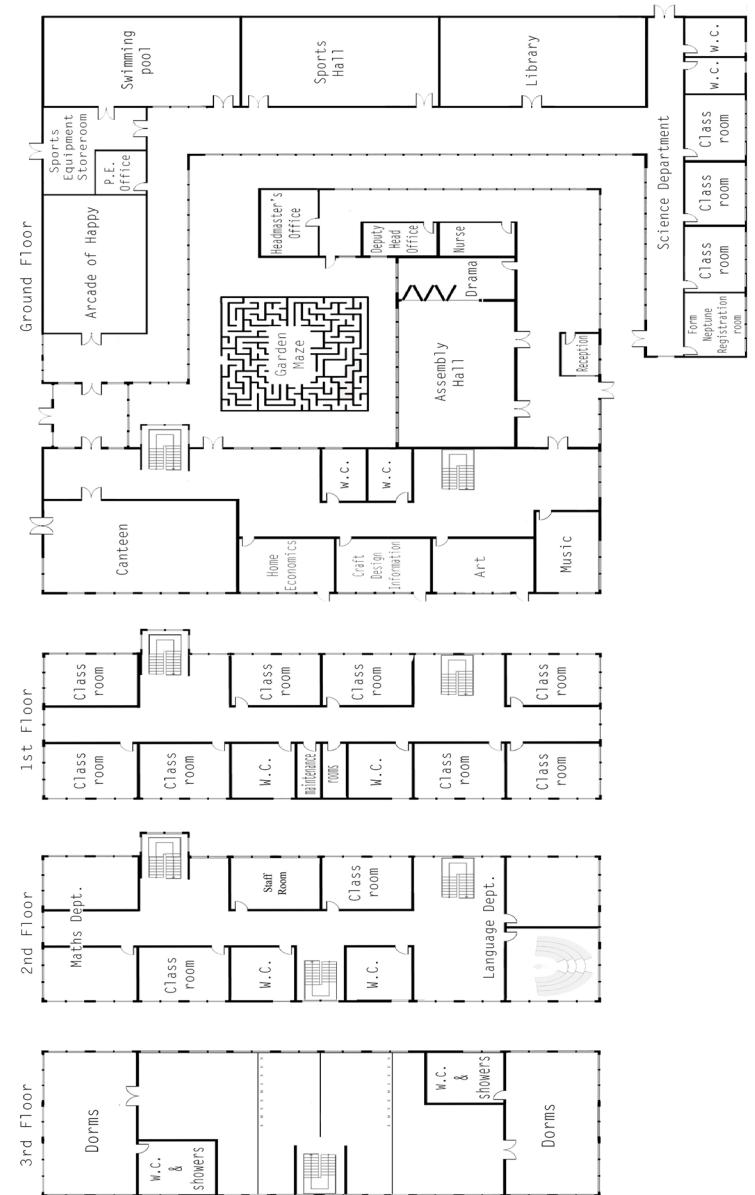
Front of school



Arial view of school



White Dove School of Conduct Floor Plan



Chapter One



Charlie felt the hand of Constable Dunstable on his shoulder. “Now, you make sure you behave yourself for Mrs Bottomly,” warned the police constable, opening the door to one of the many Portakabins dotted around the school and ushering Charlie inside. “Sorry for the late arrival, Mrs Bottomly.” Constable Dunstable addressed a dumpy woman who stood at the front of a classroom of comatose-looking children. “Mr Grimm stopped me; apparently the lad smashed one of the glass doors to his Grimm & Bear It dental practice. I tell you, kept me hours Mr Grimm did, hours!”

Grabbing Charlie by his shirtsleeve, Mrs Bottomly led him to an empty seat behind Alistair Doolally and next to Daisy Fields, who scrunched her nose up at Charlie.

“Always the same with that one!” the constable continued, shaking his head. “Don’t think there’s been a day since I started escorting him to school that I haven’t been stopped by someone. I doubt there’s a soul in the village he hasn’t upset!” Constable Dunstable scanned the small classroom. “Say, any news about when the sewage will be cleaned up? I’m sure you can’t wait to get out of these Portakabins and back in the school.”

“Not for a while yet,” answered Mrs Bottomly, pulling her orange cardigan tight around her front as she glared at Charlie. “Thanks to whomever’s responsible!”

Looking away, Charlie did his best not to laugh as Mrs Bottomly’s formidable frame struggled within the crowded cabin. Her hefty behind clattered desks while her gigantic bosom had Alistair Doolally ducking for cover.

“I’m sure like myself, Constable Dunstable, you have a great many important things to be getting along with, so if you don’t mind.” Mrs Bottomly ushered the constable out the door.

BRRRRRRRRRRRIIIINNNGGGG!



“And thank you for bringing Charlie to the end of my lesson,” continued Mrs Bottomly as the school bell rang. “WALK! DON’T RUN!” she shouted, grabbing Charlie by the scruff of his collar and pulling him back from the throng of students racing out of the Portakabin. “And where do you think you’re going?”

“First break,” said Charlie, being dragged back to his seat.

“If you think you’re going on break after waltzing in at this time you’re sadly mistaken!” Mrs Bottomly stated, glaring at Charlie as she sat him down.

“It’s not my fault I’m late!” Charlie protested. “I would’ve ‘waltzed’ in on time if it hadn’t been for Constable Duncie and Fool!”

“Is the lad referring to me?” asked Constable Dunstable, popping his head around the door.

“Spare me your petty excuses,” snapped Mrs Bottomly, her eyes fixed on Charlie while offering a dismissive wave to the constable.

Charlie smiled at the clearly offended Constable Dunstable, whose head promptly disappeared again behind the door.

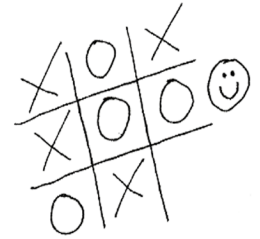
“I don’t know what you have to smile about; perhaps clowning around is in your nature. Gawd knows how I’d be if my parents had run away to be circus clowns,” said Mrs Bottomly, putting on a long, green cagoule. “You’re to remain in this classroom for all of first break going over the equations on the board,” she ordered, zipping up the cagoule. “And don’t you even think about absconding when I’m gone, for I’ll be keeping an eye on you from the playground!” She pointed out of a window to where children were already playing and happily screaming after one another. “When I come back I expect all those equations to be solved. If any are wrong you’ll be back at lunchtime to do them all again. Is that clear?”

Charlie shrugged.

“Is that clear?” shouted Mrs Bottomly, looking back as she opened the door.

“Yes.”

“You enjoy wasting other people’s time, don’t you?” Mrs Bottomly remarked, standing in the entrance, her large behind barely fitting in the doorframe. “Well, you’re not going to waste mine!” She slammed the door behind her, the key clanging as it fell on the floor.



Charlie sat silently at the desk, watching the other children having fun outside. He noticed flecks of rain appear on the window and, beyond that, Mrs Bottomly staring in his direction, jabbing a finger at where he should be looking. Turning to the board, Charlie mentally answered the first few equations. He sighed glancing outside, where he just caught sight of a sponge football rebounding off Mrs Bottomly’s head. Laughing, Charlie watched his teacher grab Alistair Doolally by the arm and wag a finger in his face.

Charlie kept watching Mrs Bottomly as he pushed his chair back, got up and picked the key up off the floor. Mrs Bottomly was still reprimanding Alistair Doolally as Charlie locked the door and made his way to the class cupboard. He removed a portable TV/DVD and placed it on the teacher’s desk. He searched through the desk drawers and discovered the DVD *Chase Wildgoose: A New Breed of Spy, Series One*.

With his feet pushed against the desktop, Charlie rocked back on the chair, when there was a sudden, loud drumming of rain. Outside he couldn’t see anyone any more, only blurred movements through the torrential downpour. The blurred movements quickly took on the form of his classmates pressed against the panes of glass in the door while Mrs Bottomly repeatedly tried the door handle.

“Charlie Dee, you open this door this instant!” shouted Mrs Bottomly.

The small, imploring faces of his classmates pressed against the glass of the door and windows. Charlie offered them a smile and a wave as he turned on the DVD.

“Open this door!” demanded Mrs Bottomly, thumping her hand against the window, her rings rattling the glass. “You hear me? Open this door!”

Charlie fell forward with the chair, stood up and slowly approached the door.

“About time!” snapped Mrs Bottomly, folding her arms with the rest of the students huddled behind her. “Hurry up, it’s raining!”

Charlie placed his forefinger behind his left ear and shook his head, mouthing the word: “What?”

“Don’t play games with me!” Mrs Bottomly screamed, slamming her hand against the window. “Open this door now!”

Charlie shook his head, pointed at the TV/DVD, then to his ear, shrugging.

“Charlie Dee, you open this door!”

“What?” Charlie mouthed, again pointing to his ear. He bent down in front of the door, leaning his ear to the bottom pane of glass.

“Open this door now!” ordered Mrs Bottomly, bending down with Charlie.

Her face by the bottom pane, Charlie pulled his trousers down and pressed his bare bum against the glass. “Mrs Bottomly, meet Mrs Bottomly,” Charlie laughed as he let go a little fart that steamed up the inside of the cold pane. Performing a little dance, his bum moving from side to side, Charlie then pulled up his trousers and returned to watching *Chase Wildgoose: A New Breed of Spy*. He turned up the volume, though not so loud that he couldn’t hear Mrs Bottomly’s colourful response.

Chapter Two



With a finger, Charlie traced the laughing face of the clown on a worn circus poster he’d laid flat on the desk in the small room that adjoined the headmaster’s office. His eyes moved along the brightly decorative lettering of the name that filled one half of the poster:

SLAVEN IMPRESARIOVIC’S CURIOUS CIRCUS AND WONDERMENTS OF THE WORLDS

It wasn’t much of a poster, but Charlie knew every detail of it. He’d seen it stuck to a telephone pole only a couple of months after his parents had run off to join the circus and he’d been left with his Grandma Grumble. Charlie punched the front of the desk and snatched up the poster, stuffing it into his trouser pocket.

Underneath where he’d laid the poster, Charlie saw where on a previous detention he’d scratched into the desk with the point of a compass the words: PROPERTY OF CHARLIE DEE. He sighed as he looked around at the stacked crates that surrounded him and the countless exercise books crammed onto shelves. He knew this room almost as well as he knew the circus poster. Charlie opened the nearest crate. It was full with copies of E.B. White’s children’s classic *Charlotte’s Web*. He set about meticulously removing the final pages of the story copy by copy, taking care not to loosen the blank pages at the back. He wanted to ensure his vindictive editing wouldn’t be discovered until the reader arrived at the very end.

“Charles, you can come through now,” Mr Welsh, his headmaster, called from the next room.

Charlie grabbed another copy from the crate and carried on removing the final pages.

“Charles, in my office now!”

With the last page of text torn out, Charlie placed the eleventh doctored book back in the crate. He knew what to expect. His Grandma Grumble would be there; she always was. No doubt she’d have had a good rummaging through the school’s lost property box before making her way to the headmaster’s office. Charlie looked down at his uniform. His jacket looked more like an overcoat, his school tie was so old it could have been worn by one of the school’s founding members and when sat as he was, the ends of his trousers hiked up to nearly his knees. It was almost entirely made up of items his Grandma Grumble had found in that lost property box, regardless of whether they fitted or not!

He’d been living with his Grandma Grumble since he was six. She’d given him a room, or at least the far end of the bathroom, divided simply by a yellow shower curtain. Four years of being woken throughout the night by her hourly toilet breaks. Four years of having to wash her undergarments and pluck the hairs from her chin and top lip. Four years of frying chicken livers and spam fritters for breakfast and watching Grandma Grumble use her scraggy, long nails as knives and forks. Four years of being drilled in how she liked her tea. Six tea bags, eight sugars, no milk – and his Grandma Grumble preferred to drink straight from the teapot.

“GET IN HERE NOW!!!” demanded Mr Welsh.

While Charlie waited to hear the familiar creaking of his headmaster’s chair, he took out his circus poster and carefully folded it up before slipping it once again into his pocket. From the adjoining room a chair creaked. As Charlie got up he smiled at the thought of his headmaster tottering toward him. Mr Welsh’s walk tended to be more of a totter, for his legs were surprisingly short for such an alarmingly large upper body. Watching Mr Welsh walk always made Charlie think of a bulldog should one ever fancy trying to walk on its hind legs while holding a tray of drinks. As he stood in front of the door, it was soon, as expected, flung open.

The headmaster lurched back from the unexpected sight of Charlie directly in front of him. Mr Welsh’s hefty, rectangular head with the noticeably busted nose, cauliflower ears and close-set eyes looked even more dumbfounded than usual.

“Kind of you to get the door,” said Charlie smiling as he passed his startled headmaster. “You okay sir? You look all flustered. A man of your age really should take more...” Charlie stopped and stared, his heart still and then slowly beating harder and harder.

“Mum...Dad...” Charlie didn’t know what else to say. In the office, sitting next to his Grandma Grumble, were his parents. He figured the circus must be in town as he hadn’t seen them since they’d left him. An unstoppable smile stretched across his face. The flicker of excitement racing through him suddenly fell flat. His smile dropped away. Why were his parents here? The words his Grandma Grumble drummed into him daily came to mind: “You’re the reason your parents ran off to join the circus!”

“Thank you for your concern,” said Mr Welsh, patting Charlie on the back as he made his way back to his seat, “But rest assured,” he said, chortling, “I’ve never felt better.”

“Mum...” Charlie’s stomach tightened as he saw his mother begin to cry. He wanted to hug her, he wanted for her to hold him. He went to her instinctively, but on the way a piercing sharp pain stabbed at his chest. Looking down, he saw the bony forefinger of his Grandma Grumble. She glared up from where she was, so hunched over it appeared as if she was folding herself away. She continued jabbing her finger in Charlie until he stepped back.

“Your mum and dad have had to hotfoot it over here all because of you!”

Charlie’s mother spoke through her sniffing and taking of short breaths. “Mother, it’s...it’s fine.”

“Straight from the circus,” Grandma Grumble continued as she proceeded to slowly fold herself up, her chin now almost resting on her knees. A bony hand refused to be folded away, determined to carry on jabbing, only instead of Charlie’s chest, a crooked finger jabbed in the direction of his parents. “Which

is why they're still in their silly clothes. I can't say I ever liked clowns."

Both Mr and Mrs Dee wore oversized, baggy trousers. His were half yellow and half red, hers half green and half blue, both with braces of the opposite colour to the side of the trousers they held up. Mr Dee wore a purple silk shirt and Mrs Dee a pink silk shirt that both had large, fluffy, yellow buttons. Their faces were painted white with big red noses and mouths; Mr Dee a happy clown face, Mrs Dee a sad clown face.

"Mum, Dad" said Charlie, smiling at his father, a smile that suddenly felt out of place. He looked down at his parents' large clown shoes and then to his own tatty, black shoes and then back up to his father. Not even the big, happy, red-painted smile could mask the disappointment.

"Charles, your parents and I have been discussing your continuing behavioural problems," said Mr Welsh, standing by his chair. "It seems a day doesn't pass without you being reported to my office for some regrettable reason or other. You're rude, disruptive in class, and you show nothing but contempt for your teachers and fellow students. Only yesterday you glued me to my chair! It also left my trousers stuck to my..." Mr Welsh grabbed the arms of his chair and winced as he delicately lowered himself onto a small inflatable ring. "...Well, as you can imagine it was all very painful."

"I can tell you the boy's no better at home!" Grandma Grumble chipped in.

Charlie stared purposefully at nothing.

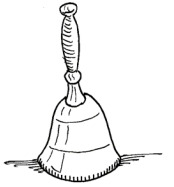
"But has it really come to this?" Mrs Dee sobbed.

"We've all tried to help Charles, but all attempts are simply ignored," explained Mr Welsh. "He's a very angry young man; even placing him in the school rugby team didn't help!"

"Mum..." Charlie gulped; he felt sick, with a sense of fear clawing its way from his gut up into his throat. "What's going on, Mum?"

Then behind him came the sound of a small bell ringing. It signalled an arrival.

Chapter Three



Charlie hadn't heard the door open and he didn't hear it close, but stooping by the door towered a tall, shadowy figure. Hidden completely by a hooded, black cloak, the figure, even bent forward, was almost twice the height of an average man, his head and shoulders pressing against the ceiling. Thoughts of where the cloaked figure had come from left Charlie's mind almost as soon as they arrived, crumbled away with a shudder of fear. He collapsed onto a chair that he hadn't previously been aware of. For all his longing to be with his parents, he was unable to do anything other than stare at the shadowy figure.

The tattered ends of the figure's long cloak spread out across the floor, wriggling around like nightmarish tentacles. Long sleeves draped over unseen hands in a waterfall of tattered material. Charlie pushed back in his chair, and his body tensed as if expecting to be struck by something hard. Full of fear, he found his eyes drawn toward a small, shiny object; hanging from one of the long sleeves, seemingly held by scraggy shreds of cloak moving like black, twisted skeletal fingers, was a small silver bell.

Slinking to one side of Charlie and then the other, the shadowy figure disappeared behind him. Suddenly, the large, black hood of the cloak loomed over him like a gaping jaw. Within the hood's darkness, two beady eyes stared out at him like miniature suns devoid of any warmth... Chilled, Charlie looked away. Now wanting desperately to be with his parents, he was unable to move, his shivering seemingly taking all of his strength.

Despite searching deep inside himself for any hidden reserves, Charlie couldn't even find the will to move from under the figure's piercing gaze. Only his heart seemed able to function, thumping madly against his chest.

"Mr and Mrs Dee, this...this..." Mr Welsh bumbled, his voice changing pitch, "...this is the Courier, and he will be responsible for transferring Charles to the place we spoke about earlier."

The Courier twisted toward Charlie's mum and dad, offering a short jingle of the bell, which oddly came across as, "Hello"

HONK!

Charlie's mum dropped the loud handheld horn she used at the circus as both she and his dad gawped at the Courier.

"Mum?" Free from the figure's stare, Charlie was able to muster the strength to move, a strength stemming from a desperate need for his mother to hold him, to comfort him. He picked up the horn, but as he tried to hand it back to his mother, Charlie discovered that his hands were empty, the horn had already been returned and he was back in his chair. "Dad?" Charlie implored, reaching out to his father only to find his arms back by his sides. "Mum...Dad...Please!" Charlie's voice faltered. He shook his head; his mind felt fuzzy.

"Mr Welsh, are you sure it has come to this?" Charlie's mum finally blubbered, tears smearing the black painted tear on her white painted face. His dad pulled an endless supply of different-coloured knotted handkerchiefs from his pocket.

"We've done all we can!" muttered Grandma Grumble.

"Can someone talk to me?" Charlie shouted, though he might as well have whispered for all the difference it made. It was as if he was no longer even there.

"I assure you, Mrs Dee, if there were any other alternative we would take it, but your son has exhausted all of the chances offered him."

"Yes, I'm sure you're right if you and Mother say it's for the best, but is this really the only option?" Charlie's mother wiped her eyes with a yellow and green handkerchiefs while blowing her nose with an orange one.

HONK!

She instinctively honked the loud, handheld horn as she blew her nose.

The small, silver bell jingled.

"I'm sure it is for the best. It'll be all right," sobbed Charlie's

mother, tears spraying out of the corners of her eyes, soaking Charlie's dad and a visibly annoyed Grandma Grumble.

The small silver bell jingled.

Charlie's mother wiped her eyes and nose. "When you put it... sniff...like that, it does sound like...sniff...a wonderful opportunity." She breathed calmly, as if the jingling of the bell had eased all her concerns, answered all her questions.

"What opportunity? What's happening?" Charlie called out to his mother, but the words seemed not to reach her as everything slowed down.

In a distorted voice, Charlie's father sounded as if he ran on batteries that were running low. "IIII'm deeeeiightteeed Chaaarlie's gooone tooo suuuch aaa schoooool." Charlie's father slowly wrung out the handkerchiefs before putting them away, "III'm suuure heee'll maaake usss alllll veeeryyy prooooud."

"Gone? I'm here!" Charlie tried in vain to move from his chair. It was as if someone had stuck him to it. "And what school? I'm at school!"

"Reeealllly iiis foor thee beest," said Grandma Grumble, a tear slowly rolling down from the corner of an eye while sounding like she was winding down. "Aaand yooou knooow whaaat? III aaalllreeeadyyyy miiissss thee booy!"

"Miss me? I haven't gone anywhere!" Charlie frantically tried to free himself, but not even the chair feet would move!

The small silver bell jingled.

Looking up, Charlie saw that everything around him was frozen. Fixed in their seats, his parents held hands, heads tilting toward each other, smiling. Charlie noticed that even his Grandma Grumble, never one to sit still despite her age, didn't move a muscle. Across the desk, Mr Welsh also remained motionless, a finger mid-pick up the left nostril of his busted nose. "MUM!... DAD!..." Charlie desperately tried to shout some life into his parents, failing at the same time to pull himself free from his chair.

The small silver bell jingled.

As if stepping out of a snapshot, the Courier turned toward Charlie. Then, as the tattered ends of the cloak stretched, clawed and wriggled across the floor, the tall figure tore into two almost identical figures. Standing by the desk with Charlie's parents, Grandma Grumble, and Mr Welsh remained a frozen version of the Courier, a version minus the small silver bell. Towering over Charlie was a living, breathing version. Scrunching his eyes shut and holding his breath, Charlie tried to remain as still as his family and headmaster now were.

He heard the now-familiar jingle of the small silver bell.

Charlie opened an eye. He quickly pulled his feet up onto his chair, bringing his knees tight into his body. Across the floor a thin mist rose, rapidly thickening into a grey blanket of cloud. The jingling of the bell sounded more like the rumble of thunder as it drummed inside Charlie's head. He rubbed his eyes. His vision was all blurred with a rippling effect that dwindled away into an encroaching darkness.

He tried to call for help, but his words disappeared into a haze the moment they left his lips. Charlie's body felt light and limp as he watched the fog swirl around him. His hands cut through it, wafting it away from his face, but the murky clouds rumbled on. Swirling wisps of mist weaved around Charlie's desperately fanning hands and then, as if with a mind of their own, darted into his mouth and nostrils. Gagging, he grasped helplessly at the mist. His eyes widened as his field of vision shrank to the size of a pinhole. Nauseated, he watched on in horror as the flesh melted away from his hands, dripping in all directions like droplets of rain. Clouds then swept over Charlie like a corrosive tide. Unable to breathe and barely conscious, the last things he saw were the tendons of his body and then the bones underneath as they washed away into nothingness.

Chapter Four



Had it not been for the movement of his eyelids, Charlie would have thought his eyes were still closed – he couldn't see anything! As he groggily got to his feet, his head felt like it had been used as both the tenpins and the bowling ball. He blinked, desperate for any change. Nothing. There was nothing but immeasurable blackness. Other than his own short, rapid breaths, Charlie couldn't hear anything either. Still feeling woozy, he tried shaking the clouds out of his mind. It didn't help. *Mum! Dad!* Charlie thought, desperately trying to find their faces in the darkness. His throat tightened and his heart felt as if it were a tablet dissolving in water. He'd waited so long to see them and he sensed they were already gone again – the same way he sensed that wherever he was, it wasn't in his headmaster's office.

Charlie stretched out his arms, blindly grasping for anything that would explain where he was. Touching something, he jerked his hand back. Slowly, he reached out his hand again. His fingers cautiously explored the surface. It felt like a wall of sorts, a rough, thin wall. It bowed as he pressed against it, and with each touch there was a soft scratching. It didn't feel right. He didn't feel right.

Remembering his Grandma Grumble and Mr Welsh, Charlie shook his head; he'd even be happy to see them! He looked around, his eyes adjusting a little to the dark – everything was now a grainy, dingy grey.

Vague outlines and shapes did nothing to help Charlie determine where he was. Somewhere behind him, he heard a soft, sweeping sound. Charlie barely managed to keep his balance as his dark world shifted slightly to one side. His heart thumping, Charlie held his breath. He remembered the small silver bell, the tall, cloaked figure.

Dwuurrf!

A shaft of light burst through the darkness. Spinning around, Charlie tripped over his own feet, hitting the floor with a painful thud. The floor felt the same as the wall, just regrettably a lot more solid. As he scrambled backwards into the darkness, now afraid of what the light might reveal, Charlie avoided it like a jittery vampire. Everywhere he went, the scratching sound followed. As he pressed against a bowing wall, the scratching stopped. He closed his eyes tight, trying to quiet his breaths. A constant thought raced through his mind: the Courier!

Charlie slowly opened his eyes. Even though the corners remained hidden in darkness, Charlie could now make out the walls. As he examined his dimly lit surroundings, he suddenly felt constricted, imprisoned. He wanted to stretch out his arms and legs just because he knew he couldn't. The ceiling barely above him, Charlie noticed a join running along the middle. *What is this?* Charlie thought, resisting the urge to call out to his mum and dad. He scrunched his eyes to hold back tears as he remembered his parents. *Where are you? Please, where are you?*

Charlie could see that the light was coming in through a hole. He presumed that the muffled sound he'd heard preceding the light had come from whatever had made that hole. He looked around. As far as he could tell there were no other openings, no windows and no door. Slowly he moved along the wall, and as he neared the hole, Charlie could see parts of the wall that had been pushed inside his prison. It looked like card, and whatever had punched the hole in the wall had done so from the other side. He went to touch it when he caught a glimpse of something moving outside. He paused for a moment before cautiously moving closer. It was so bright that his eyes struggled to adjust. He could make out a tiled ceiling broken up by flat-panel lights that reminded him of a hospital. The thought made him shiver. He rubbed his eyes and then stopped abruptly. It felt wrong. His hands had felt hard against his face. Moving his hands into the light, he found himself once more in darkness.

A bright yellow eye filled the small hole. Barely visible within the eye, a black pupil dilated. Charlie shot backwards and slammed into a wall, causing the whole prison to shift with him. He dropped to the floor and, hidden in the relative safety of the darkness, turned toward the eye. The small opening again offered the welcome sight of light. Charlie edged closer to the hole.

"Ummph! Aurg! Urgh!" Charlie went crashing from one side to the other, as he and his prison were lifted up. His dark world shook violently when suddenly it was yanked forward, sending him tumbling to the back of his prison. The bright yellow eye returned. Hidden in the shadows, his back against the wall, Charlie stared at the eye. He felt a familiar cold chill as the yellow eye looked directly back at him.

Charlie's prison again shook from side to side. Desperate to remain hidden, he tried to wedge himself in a dark corner. Slits of light appeared where Charlie frantically clawed at the wall, unable to hold his position. He bounced across the floor, which fortunately was no longer as solid, and crashed face-first into the returning yellow eye.

"Fhmmph..." Charlie's intended curse word failed to be voiced as a bar of soap appeared in his mouth. He could feel bubbles foaming as the soap moved briskly over his tongue and gums. ≥ By heck! ≤ a bubble popped, revealing a comment spoken in his own voice. Scrambling backward, Charlie couldn't get to his feet. "What the... fhmmph—" more bubbles foamed from his mouth; ≥ Fuddyduds! ≤ Racing through the bubbles, his voice popped all around. ≥ Jeez Louise! ≤ ≥ Shoot! ≤ ≥ Jeepers! ≤ He could sense the cold stare of the yellow eye on him. ≥ Oh my giddy aunt! ≤ ≥ Goodness gracious me! ≤ With his hands desperately clawing, Charlie tore through the nearest wall.

Blinded by an explosion of light as he broke free from the darkness, Charlie found himself falling and shortly thereafter hitting the ground with a thud. ≥ Sugar! ≤ As his eyes slowly adjusted to the light, he saw bubbles floating and popping above him. ≥ Drat! ≤ ≥ Fiddlesticks! ≤ Through the bubbles that popped polite alternatives to his swearing, Charlie saw that his prison had been nothing more than a package. Winded, he arched his back, trying to force his body to accept a breath. No sooner had he managed half a breath than it was taken away. Staring down at his hands, a chill shuddered through him. Charlie doubled up; his stomach felt as if it was eating him from the inside out. He dropped to his elbows, unable to take his eyes off his hands – only they weren't his hands.

Chapter Five



Staring at what had once been his hands, Charlie gulped. They moved at his command, what they touched he felt, he even sensed his heavy breaths upon them, but they weren't his hands. They couldn't be! Each time they curled back and forth, he hoped they wouldn't, but they responded exactly to his every command. The long curved brown claws were nothing like the pink fingers and thumbs he expected to see when he looked at his hands. All that seemed to remain was the dirt that now covered the claws – he'd never been the cleanest of kids.

Charlie clawed at the claws, trying to remove them, the pain of each attempt leaving him in no doubt that they were his hands, his claws. He took a deep breath and then looked at the rest of himself. He felt sick. It was not only his hands that had changed. His feet also had claws, while his legs were short and scaly.

“Huuurrrgh!” Charlie threw up. Somewhere around him, he heard cries of disgust and someone laughing, quickly followed by some comment. Light-headed, Charlie barely avoided landing in what he'd chucked up as he crashed to the ground, his legs zapped of energy. He gulped a couple of times, doing his best to not be sick again. He'd gone from being one of the tallest boys in his class, fit and healthy if admittedly also a bit scruffy, to a squat, podgy, hunched, scaly, clawed thing. A scaly, clawed thing that had a bum that was, to be polite, rather weighty! Disturbed by this weightiness, Charlie turned and saw, in a flickering moment of relief, that it wasn't his bum but a tail – a huge, fat, scaly tail! “Huuurrrgh!” In a crumpled heap of scales and claws with tears in his eyes, Charlie did his best not to cry.

On the other side of his splattered sick (on the fittingly sickly coloured lino floor), Charlie noticed a row of desks towering ahead of him. He could only see the feet of the occupants, which were actually hooves and a pair of black, clawed, webbed feet. Charlie hung his head into his claws, his snout butting into his paws, just before he poked himself in the eye with a claw.

“Fhmmph...” Bubbles foamed from his mouth. Charlie watched a bubble float freely until it popped. ≥ Nuts! ≤ It was spooky hearing his own voice say something he hadn't said. At least the taste of the soap was marginally better than the vile, bile aftertaste of being sick. As he looked around he observed that he'd come to rest against one of the legs of a desk. He leaned his head back and followed the leg up to the edge of the desktop. Towering over the desk was a dark, tattered hood with two bright yellow eyes glaring down. ≥ Codswallop! ≤ ≥ Blast! ≤

Okay, it's all dark again, Charlie thought, surprised to discover he'd rolled up into a tight ball. He knew instinctively that the tough scales covering his body would offer a strong, protective shield. In the dark, he felt along his chubby belly. *There has to be some way to get out of this body!* Charlie thought, as he searched for a zipper or some buttons. He found neither, but under a larger scale he felt a familiar folded corner. He didn't need to see it to know that it was his circus poster. Holding the poster to his chest, he narrowed his eyes, holding back the tears. Teachers had often set him endless pages to read or copy, equations or problems to solve. Such things he found easy. This was different. He couldn't figure it out. It made no sense. He didn't even know what he was, let alone what was going on!

Suddenly, on either side, Charlie felt a hand grab hold of him. Already rolled up into an almost impossibly tight ball, he tried unsuccessfully to roll up even more. Scrunching his eyes closed, he thought of his mum and dad, his Grandma Grumble, Mr Welsh and Mrs Bottomly. He hoped so much to open his eyes and see any of them. Then, Charlie felt and heard a knocking on his back, followed by a voice that was neither his mother's nor his father's – or his Grandma Grumble's or Mr Welsh's or Mrs Bottomly's.

“Charles Dee, only son of parents Gary and Trudy, who lives with his Grandma Grumble at 42 Open Close, Downe, do not be alarmed. Please unroll yourself and all shall be explained.”

“Who...who...who are you?” Charlie barely managed to ask, choosing to remain an armoured ball.

“I'm your form tutor, Mr Pendleton.”

“Mrs Bottomly is my form tutor. Where are my parents? Where's Mr Welsh? Where am I?”

“Charles, I shall not answer any further questions or discuss anything else until you unroll yourself.”

Charlie didn't answer, nor did he unroll himself. In the darkness, it was easier to pretend that everything was as it had been. None of what he'd seen could possibly be real. It must be a nightmare, Charlie thought, it can't be real. “You're just a bad dream!” he shouted, hoping to wake himself up. “This isn't real. It can't be.”

“Ha-ha, Diddums thinks it's all a dream.”

Charlie's heart beat faster. This was a new voice.

“Another word, Walter, and you can forget about whatever lunchtimes you have left!” Charlie felt himself shifted about and then placed down as the voice that had earlier claimed to be Mr Pendleton reverted back to its previous calming tone. “Charles, I have placed you back on the floor for your own safety. We don't want you falling off any desks and, if I'm honest, I'd rather you throw up on the floor than on my desk.”

Charlie heard the sound of bent knees cracking and could sense somebody in front of him. “Now Charles, whether you take my word or carry on believing me to be a bad dream, the only way you're going to find out what is real and what is not is by unrolling yourself.”

Charlie said nothing. He wanted to believe it was all a nightmare, but even in the darkness, he couldn't hide from the fact that he felt different. Heart thumping, he tried to reassure himself: *I'll sit up, open my eyes and I'll be back in my bed rolled up under the blanket.*

Sliding the folded circus poster under a scale, he took a deep breath, sat up and opened his eyes.

“Fhmmph...” Charlie nearly shot back into a ball, trying to spit the bar of soap out, only for it to wash his mouth harder, ≧ Fudge! ≦

“That's you, Charles. That is who you are, for now at least.” Charlie heard the voice of Mr Pendleton say. He wanted to look at the teacher, but he couldn't take his eyes off what he saw before

him. A square frameless mirror the size of a piece of A4 paper showed a reflection of Charlie that he did not recognise.

“Huuurrrgh!”

“Is he going to carry on being sick?” Charlie heard a high-pitched voice ask, “I'm not very good with the smell. I'm already feeling quite queasy!”

“Fillmore, need I remind you that when you arrived you were so sick we had to evacuate the entire classroom?”

“That wasn't my fault! I was a hippopotamus then! They've got big mouths!”

“Still got a big mouth,” claimed another voice.

“That's so rude!”

“Sidney and Fillmore, both of you should show more considerations as neither of you arrived any differently.” Mr Pendleton stated sternly. “We all arrive the same way.”

Transfixed by his reflection, Charlie didn't pay much attention to what was being said around him. Blinking at him with shiny, lively, black eyes from a small, pointed head was a strange face. A face he couldn't recognise even though he knew it was his. He felt dizzy. The barely visible ears and the long fleshy muzzle with prominent nostrils – it was a nightmare! Charlie shook his head and the strange reflection did likewise. It was him! If it wasn't who he used to be, it was still him, just not in body. He felt prickly all over, with an uneasiness lingering in his stomach. As he stretched his limbs and claws he wanted to somehow burst out of the body he saw before him. He closed his eyes and took a couple of deep breaths before opening them again.

Hunching forward, Charlie noticed he instinctively used the weighty, scaly tail as a counterbalance. Staring along the thick, reddish-brown scales, Charlie saw they increased in size from his snout across his back and down the long, fat tail. They covered almost his entire body, bar the bare, chubby underbelly and his face. He tried picking at the scales on what used to be his arm. They reminded him of a weather-fearing fir cone that closes up in wet conditions. He looked at his legs, which were now hind legs.

They were short and tipped with sharp claws, while what used to be his arms were now forelegs. They felt stronger and, like the claws, longer than the hind legs. He dropped back to the ground.

“What the ̂ crummy buttons! ̂ am I?” Charlie spluttered through the soap, “and what the ̂ pants and knickers! ̂ is with these bubbles?!”

Chapter Six



“Welcome to White Dove School of Conduct, Charles, where at present I’m sure you’ll be tickled pink to know: you’re a pangolin.”

Neither answer helped – Charlie had never heard of the school and didn’t know what a pangolin was – but hearing Mr Pendleton’s voice did. He felt a comforting wave wash through him, taking away with it the prickly, uneasy feeling. His breathing steady, he studied his reflection, turning from side to side: the scaly body and tail, the claws and the pointed face with the squat snout and prominent nostrils. He couldn’t stop staring at himself.

“He’s even vainer than Maggie!” Charlie heard a new voice comment.

“Shut up, fish breath,” a girl’s voice snapped back. “I can’t help being beautiful any more than you can help walking like someone’s pulled your pants down!”

“Maggie, Ramsey, that’s quite enough,” said Mr Pendleton.

Again the voices were a minor distraction as Charlie stared at the mirror. Unable to break eye contact with himself, he followed his reflection as it rose. Desperately looking up, his reflection looked down on him with the same desperate eyes. No longer able to see the mirror, Charlie found himself facing a tatty pair of green slippers and brown cords. Tucked into the cords was a khaki shirt with two buttoned-down breast pockets; a khaki tie was hanging over a visibly puffed-out chest.

“I’m Mr Pendleton,” said the form tutor, smiling as he looked back at Charlie.

Charlie blinked. Apart from the eyes, large nose and smile, Mr Pendleton’s enthusiastic face was almost entirely lost to a massive, bushy beard and a shock of wild, brown, curly hair. *Looks like some prehistoric caveman!* thought Charlie.

“I can assure you I’m quite modern,” said Mr Pendleton, appearing to answer the thought. “I cook, clean and I even iron my socks.”

A chill shuddered through Charlie. If his thoughts being answered weren’t scary enough, the figure who took the mirror from Mr Pendleton was even worse! It was the same faceless, hooded figure he’d just seen towering over him. Charlie averted his eyes from those of the Courier. He could still feel the cold stare of the beady yellow eyes as he watched the tattered ends of the Courier’s black sleeves shift like broken and twisted fingers, folding up the mirror along invisible lines. Now nothing more than a small pocketable square, the mirror disappeared under one of the sleeves.

“Well, that will be all; thank you again for your prompt delivery.”

Turning to Mr Pendleton, the Courier answered, as he had in the headmaster’s office, by ringing the small silver bell.

“I was merely being polite,” Mr Pendleton answered the jingle, “and this is not the time or place to be raking up the past!”

The bell jingled aggressively back.

“I’m not going to argue with you,” said Mr Pendleton. “Right now I have to help Charles; you of all people should understand how difficult these changes are...and no, I’m not.”

Charlie watched the small silver bell. It was about to jingle, only to stop abruptly. Now Charlie had even less of an idea what was going on. He hadn’t understood the jingling, and as for Mr Pendleton, he appeared to be able to read minds.

“I assure you I can’t,” Mr Pendleton turned to Charlie and offered him a warm smile.

Charlie stared back, afraid to think at all. Turning his attention back to the silver bell, he felt almost drawn to it. It was the last thing he’d heard and seen before finding himself surrounded by madness. Charlie watched it slowly disappear into the dark, empty night of the Courier’s tattered sleeve. For all the fear he felt in the presence of the Courier, seeing the bell vanish made him feel as if with it went all of his hopes. His stomach tightened as fear

fluttered again through his body. All he could do was watch the towering, cloaked figure.

“Great, now I know I’m going to be sick!” Charlie heard the high-pitched voice complain.

Pfff

It sounded as if the Courier had a puncture and Charlie felt a waft of cool air as the tattered cloak collapsed. On the floor, in a crumpled heap, the dark cloak began fizzing away into a lingering, rotten-egg-smelling, sulphur mist.

“Can’t you make him use the door, sir?” Charlie heard the high-pitched voice to which Mr Pendleton had earlier attached the name Fillmore. “We all learnt yesterday that when we smell something we also taste it.” Charlie tried to see Fillmore, but he couldn’t see above the desk. “It’s why I stopped letting off stink bombs!”

“You’d been letting off stink bombs?” Mr Pendleton inquired, coughing slightly and waving a hand in front of his face.

“Not since we did that stuff about the chemical senses!”

“So that would be from yesterday then?”

“Sir, can we not let ourselves be distracted from what’s important?” Fillmore started gagging. “Can we open a window or something? I’m dying here!”

All around, Charlie could hear others heaving and clearing their throats.

“I couldn’t agree more about the smell,” Mr Pendleton admitted, opening a window and a door to allow a breeze to blow through. “Though don’t think we won’t be carrying on our conversation about the stink bombs.”

As Mr Pendleton made his way back to the front of the classroom, Charlie looked around as best he could. He stretched his neck in a vain attempt to see who was sitting in the front row. He couldn’t see anything over the desktops.

“Now, Charles, assuming you have finished with being sick, is it okay if I pick you up and place you on my desk?” asked

Mr Pendleton, bending down to Charlie, who offered a nod of agreement.

Up close, he could see Mr Pendleton's beard was a graveyard of many a lost morsel, while also being sprayed by a shower of spittle as Mr Pendleton added, "From up here I'll be able to introduce you properly to your new classmates." A half-chewed peanut splattered onto Charlie's cheek.

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry," Mr Pendleton spluttered again, wiping off the chewed peanut and popping it back into his mouth. Having been lifted onto the desk, Charlie didn't have time to think about the spittle or the chewed peanut. Gawking at his new classmates, his heart almost stopped. It was more like a zoo than a school!

Chapter Seven



Though he didn't know anyone in the room, Charlie recognised most of the different animals seated along the four rows of desks. Most noticeable was a beaver sitting at a magnificently carved workstation in the front row. The legs were a sculptured, tangled mess of people reaching toward gargoyles sitting on the corners of the desktop that had clearly been designed to maximise work efficiency. There was a reading stand holding open a book, some pens laid in grooves along one side of the workstation and at the end, sticking out from a neatly carved hole, was a ruler and more pens. Next to the beaver, a sheep seated at an ordinary desk clearly wasn't happy to be in direct comparison with the elaborate workstation.

Behind those animals, Charlie noticed a large, white bird with a big, grey beak that was sitting by a duck-billed platypus. Slumped over the next desk was a greying brown, furry, bear-like body that Charlie recognised as a sloth. To the side of the sloth, sitting upright at another desk, was a large penguin wearing a bag of frozen peas on its head. Remembering an earlier comment about Ramsey walking around as if his pants had been pulled down, Charlie wondered if the penguin was Ramsey. *What am I thinking?* Charlie shook his head in disbelief. *None of this can be real.*

"This is very real, Charlie," said Mr Pendleton softly. "And these are your new classmates."

As unnerving as it was having his thoughts answered, Charlie did find it calming whenever Mr Pendleton spoke. He wondered if the teacher's calming influence stemmed from his seemingly being the only normal person in the class – the only person! Charlie glanced around at the students. He closed his eyes. For all Mr Pendleton's reassuring and calming tone, Charlie still couldn't believe he was in a classroom of animals acting like children. *How was it possible?* He was sure that everything would be

normal when he opened his eyes. He was sure of it. It just had to be! He opened his eyes.

Three rows back, a goose received a small note from a bulky, black-and-white animal crammed behind one of the wooden desks. Staring at the horse-like animal with a small, stunted trunk, Charlie shook his head. He had no idea what kind of animal that was! He noticed that on the desk of the goose was a small pile of notes. Plucking out a feather, the goose dipped the quill into an inkpot and seemed to give them a mark.

“I’m sure all this seems very strange,” said Mr Pendleton, sitting up alongside Charlie on the desk. “It’s never easy arriving at a new school.”

“That’s a– fhmmmp–” ≥ crummidy dum dum! ≤ “–under-statement!” spluttered Charlie as a bar of soap vigorously washed his mouth out.

“Yes, you asked about the bubbles, didn’t you?” Mr Pendleton rummaged through his beard, searching for any stray scraps of food. “Best I explain this one straight away. Simply put, profanities are not tolerated and will lead instantaneously to your mouth being washed out with soap and water.”

Charlie’s heart felt as if it were slowly sinking into his stomach. He was in a school like some deranged dream, and he was now being told it was an unbelievably strict deranged dream!

“The bubbles, when popped, will also offer more acceptable alternatives to the expletive or expletives you intended to voice.”

Charlie stared at Mr Pendleton, “Really?”

“Already you’ve experienced it several times,” answered Mr Pendleton, finding a dried baked bean in his beard and popping it into his mouth. “Though if you’re still doubtful, just this once I’ll encourage you to say something rude.”

“...No, you’re all right...”

“See, it’s aimed at having you mind your language and think about what you’re going to say.”

“O-kay,” replied Charlie, still tasting the soap in his mouth. “How hard can that be?”

≥ Flapdoodle! ≤ ≥ Twaddle! ≤ ≥ Boloney! ≤
≥ Claptrap! ≤ ≥ Bunkum! ≤ popped overhead. Charlie followed the bubbles back to the beaver, who was feverishly chewing through bar after bar of soap.

“At least in most cases,” said Mr Pendleton sighing. “Mackenzie King, I don’t know if you’re plain stubborn or simply have an overwhelming need to chew on something, but either way, please try harder to curb that industrial language of yours.”

Charlie shuddered at the thought of having to chew so much soap, spitting out what soapy water remained in his mouth. Something wet splattered on the back of his head. Looking down at the desk, Charlie had a horrible feeling he knew where the absent spit was.

“Here, allow me,” said Mr Pendleton, taking out a handkerchief and wiping the back of Charlie’s head. “Spitting is also frowned upon, and as with any form of vandalism, it is only the perpetrator who suffers from their actions.”

Charlie heard laughter coming from somewhere at the back of the class. Looking past the black-and-white-striped animal, Charlie saw two small, close-set eyes glaring back at him. Standing on its desk, Charlie recognised the animal from a wildlife book he’d read. With its ribbed blue cheeks, red muzzle and nose, it was a mandrill. Charlie remembered the book stating that the mandrill was closely related to the family of monkeys known as mangabey. Charlie had a great memory for such things. He didn’t, however, remember reading that the mandrill slicked its thick mane back with gel. With the small, close-set eyes continuing to glare at him from under its lowbrow, Charlie opted to look away and along the desk. Next to the mandrill, he saw a mongoose. At the following desk sat an odd-looking, cat-like creature with a long, swirling tail. Charlie strained to see the next desk, where he thought he saw a snake of some sort.

“Obviously, Charles, this is an awful lot to take in straight away, so if you’d like to take the desk next to Fillmore, who having been here some time, will be able to answer any questions you may have, while also being able to show you around.” Mr Pendleton pointed to an empty desk that was of little interest to Charlie. From a newly improved sense of smell and a compulsion

to eat something, he'd already become alerted to Fillmore on the neighbouring desk. A small, whitish, six-legged insect with two twitching antennae. Charlie instinctively knew it was a termite. A termite that smelled good. Even over the rotten egg smell that was lingering like the bad smell it was.

"Hello, I'm Fillmore," said the termite in a high-pitched voice. "Fillmore Lange."

In a flash, a long, sticky, worm-like tongue shot out of Charlie's mouth. The tip of the tongue stuck to a surprised-looking Fillmore, who'd barely finished his introduction. The tongue with Fillmore then shot back into Charlie's mouth. The termite tasted good.

"CHARLES!" shouted Mr Pendleton. "STICK OUT YOUR TONGUE THIS INSTANT!" It was the first time a teacher had ever asked that of Charlie. His apology was lost as the form tutor reached into his mouth with one hand clutching the sticky tongue and the other peeling Fillmore off.

Dazed, Fillmore stumbled around on his desk. "I feel traumatised."

"Charles Dee, you are not to eat your classmates!"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, but it seemed the right thing to do – it still does!"

"Yes, well, that will be down to your new form; it is in your nature to eat termites."

"Sorry, what was that?" said Fillmore, looking up from wiping off the spit that covered him.

"Then why sit me next to a termite?" Charlie covered his eyes with the palms of his paws and shook his head, "I'm asking why I'm sitting next to a termite. Mental – I'm mental!"

"Mental, no. It's a question of control, Charles; we have to learn self-control. Though it might now be in your nature to eat Fillmore here—"

"IT IS!" Fillmore blurted out. "Why do I have to sit next to some scaly thing that wants to eat me?"

"He's a pangolin, and the two of you have to learn to control what you feel is right and do what you know to be right."

"I know it's not right for him to eat me and I feel pretty much the same way about it!"

"But you said it's in a pangolin's nature to eat termites" said Charlie, looking up at Mr Pendleton.

"Sir, I don't want to sit next to him if that's going to be his attitude!"

Mr Pendleton turned to Charlie, while raising his hands in a calming motion to the termite, and asked: "So you are a pangolin?"

"You just said I was," said Charlie, holding up his front claws, "and look at me!"

"Yes, but is that all you are? This is the question you must ask, a question we must all ask ourselves. Often we judge too much by appearance. Are you Charles Dee, sent here to learn and eventually return the best you can be? Or are you simply a pangolin, a solitary animal that roams around looking for termites to eat?"

"I might like being a pangolin." Charlie shrugged as he pulled his head into his chest and avoided eye contact with Mr Pendleton. "I might like eating termites."

"Sir, I really don't want to sit next to him. He seems set on eating me!" Fillmore raised his top pair of arms in protest.

"Charles, while we're not opposed to our students enjoying themselves, for you to have ended up here means something was in need of a change – a change for the better. However, should you choose a change for the worse, to regress instead of to progress, then you will change into something worse. Just ask Fillmore here why he's a lone termite," said Mr Pendleton. Turning to the little termite, he continued, "And Fillmore, that is why you are seated next to young Charles, to give you an incentive to work harder and move on from being a lone termite."

"By the threat of being eaten! What school of teaching did you go to?"

“Fillmore, he has a tongue the length of his body, he could grab you no matter where I seated him.”

“He does?!”

“Yes, he does.”

“I do?”

“Yes, you do.”

“Well, I hope you know that the continuous threat of his gummy tongue yanking me into the gallows of his gut is going to affect my work.”

“I can but hope,” said Mr Pendleton with a wry smile.

“How is this possible?” Charlie asked, staring at his claws.
“How is any of this possible?”

“All shall be explained once I’ve called the register,” said Mr Pendleton, opening the black bound book. He removed the top of a red marking pen and began the roll call. “Neville Bird?”

Charlie looked around to put an animal with the name. Behind him, he saw the large, white bird checking a label sewn into its plumage. A big smile lit up the bird’s grey beak. Its big, light blue, webbed feet tapped on the floor as the bird excitedly pointed at the note. “It’s me! Here I am! I’m here!”

“Yes, thank you Neville, but you also have to tell me what at present you are here as,” said Mr Pendleton.

The large bird frantically rifled through some more feathers.

“And don’t forget I need the name both in English *and* Latin,” added Mr Pendleton.

“Blue-footed booby, *Sula nebouxii*,” Neville quickly shouted, waving aloft the correct note.

“Very good, thank you,” said Mr Pendleton, marking a tick in the register. “Charles Dee?”

Charlie didn’t reply.

Mr Pendleton called a little louder, “Charles Dee?”

Again Charlie couldn’t answer.

“Charles, nobody is expecting you to know the full name of the animal you are, let alone what it is in Latin. Until such time arrives you can reply, “Here,” when I call your name. Much as I’m sure you did at your previous school. Even young Fillmore has the gusto to shout out, “Here”. Isn’t that right, Fillmore?” Mr Pendleton looked up from the register, “Fillmore! CHARLES!” Mr Pendleton dived across his desk. “STICK OUT YOUR TONGUE THIS INSTANT!”